



Grim outlook for gravestone manufacturers amid supply chain squeeze



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If you've lost a loved one recently, international supply chain delays may be making the grieving process even harder.

This fall, consumers have seen shortages in goods like toilet paper, bicycles, and consumer electronics. But monument manufacturers say granite, used to make gravestones, has become hard to obtain.

"My sales manager here, he's fielding calls all the time nowadays — 'Any idea when our monument's coming in?'" said Tony Bekavac, president of Rudez Granite & Bronze in Jefferson Hills. "We try to give our best estimation of when that's going to occur, but you know, as we have found, we can't even predict that because it's just so unpredictable anymore."

Since 1958, Rudez Granite & Bronze has specialized in custom gravestones and monuments. According to Mr. Bekavac, he's never seen delays like this in the business' history.



*Dan Blaney, an employee of Rudez Granite and Bronze, installs a gravestone at the Peaceful Pastures Pet Cemetery Thursday, Nov. 11, 2021, in Canonsburg.
(Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)*

“We’re looking at customers that have had orders with us for almost a year, and pre-pandemic, even when we were importing granite from China, we were no more than six months out turnaround time,” Mr. Bekavac said. “So that turnaround time has more than doubled.”

Mr. Bekavac is seeing delays in both foreign and domestic granite due to the COVID-19 pandemic. He said shut-downs and congestion at ports plus a lack of shipping containers are delaying overseas imports from countries like China, the world’s largest granite producer.

Before the pandemic, Mr. Bekavac’s customers sometimes had their monuments ready in as little as six weeks. With orders now backed up to a year, a new kind of waiting game has been created.

“We’re a little different in a sense that we’re dealing with people’s cemetery memorials,” said Mr. Bekavac. “I had a broken shelf for my refrigerator, and I ordered it in January of this year, and I ended up getting it in August. I wasn’t mad about it, but I was frustrated — what’s taking so long? And this was for a \$30 shelf in a refrigerator. Like I said to my sales manager recently, ‘we’re dealing with people’s memorials for their loved ones that they want to see in a cemetery that cost thousands of dollars.’ So it’s new territory for us.”

Vince Dioguardi, president of Rome Monument on Pittsburgh’s North Side, said the family-owned business is blessed to have a large inventory of granite on hand. Still, they’re feeling the ripples in the supply chain.



*Granite headstones on display in the showroom at Rudez Granite and Bronze photographed on Wednesday, Nov. 10, 2021, in Jefferson Hills.
(Andrew Rush/Post-Gazette)*

“If a family selects a granite that is at a quarry overseas, the whole port congestion has drastically expanded lead times on material getting to us,” Mr. Dioguardi said. “Even domestic quarries, they’re having the challenges of labor shortages, truck shortages.”

A stencil problem

Preparing a monument is a lengthy process because of the design and layout process, Mr. Bekavac said. It also requires stencil, which helps manufacturers engrave lettering into the granite.

Like granite, stencil supply is jammed.

Rome Monument’s main stencil supplier is 3M, whose warehouses that have “completely dried up” according to Mr. Dioguardi. He said his company had to ration stencil for people who made orders before delays began.

“There’s just no inventory,” he said. “My assumption is that a lot of the stencil is made overseas and not made domestically, which is unfortunate. That has caused those delays in getting stencil in the warehouses that can then be sold to a monument manufacturer like myself.”

According to Anna Nagurney, a supply chain expert, many of these issues originate in China. Ms. Nagurney is a professor in the department of Operations and Information Management at University of Massachusetts Amherst.

She said China’s zero-COVID policy means manufacturing hubs like factories, mines, and ports are shut down for mandatory testing if workers there test positive for COVID-19.

“That’s been a major issue in China, because they’re so careful,” Ms. Nagurney said. “They’re so risk averse.”

“That makes it really problematic, with any kind of product,” she added. “They’ve had some manufacturing plants shut down for quite a while.”

Contributing to the backlog, Ms. Nagurney said Chinese factories that build shipping containers were shut down last year, and did not build enough containers to meet this year’s demand.

Ships that do have containers are backed up in places like the Port of Shanghai, she explained, with quarantine and required COVID testing for workers delaying the unloading process.



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The ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, which account for 40% of the United States’ containers, [were open 24/7](#) in October to speed up backlog. But even so, Ms. Nagurney said a domestic shortage of workers is leaving containers waiting on ships.

While large retailers like Amazon and Walmart have used their capital to [hire their own cargo ships](#) and beat delays ahead of the holidays, small businesses like monument manufacturers are left at the supply chain’s whim.

“Small businesses are feeling it really terribly, I’m really really worried about that,” Ms. Nagurney said. “The price of containers has gone way up, almost ten times since last year. So for small businesses, it’s terrible.”

At Rudez Granite & Bronze, Mr. Bekavac said that’s meant price increases on some monuments.

For families waiting on their monument, Mr. Bekavac just asks for patience.

“We’re just looking for patience and understanding as we’re trying to do everything that we can to get these memorials in in a timely fashion.”



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